

March 27, 2006

**Questions for the Record Submitted to
Deputy Assistant Secretary Sid Kaplan by
Senator Tom Coburn
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs
for February 7, 2006 hearing on conference spending**

Question:

The Department provides funding and support to conferences held by the same organizations every year, or sometime even more frequently.

- a. Why is it necessary to spend tax dollars to help support gatherings of the same individuals to discuss the same general themes every year?

Answer:

The geo-political and strategic objectives are in constant flux globally. As a result it is necessary to have individuals who are familiar with the ongoing themes present at these gatherings.

Question:

- b. Are there any requirements for such groups to provide a rationale to the department as to why the government should fund their gatherings when they occur so frequently?

Answer

The Department instituted a formal vetting process in FY2004. This process affects all conferences in general, but for those with 25 or more participants pre-approval by the Under Secretary for Management is required.

Requests must be submitted at least 120 days in advance of the event and must include a justification covering the following areas: 1) the benefit to the Department; 2) the outcome or results expected for participants; 3) security risks; 4) cost; 5) how the conference advances the Department's strategic priorities.

Overseas: A review of who will attend is done by the Ambassador and Deputy Chief of Mission along with the Financial Management and Management Officers. The final approval is with the Ambassador. In addition, the country team, which is made up of the agencies at the embassies, also is part of the decision making process when it directly affects their funding pool and the chairman. In addition all agencies sit in on the working capital fund meetings chaired by the Management Officer of Deputy Chief of Mission and decide on how resources will be spent.

Domestic: Bureaus determine attendance at a conference based on their financial planning numbers and budget priorities. Final approval is done by the bureau's executive office.

Question:

- c. Please provide a list of any groups and non-government entities that have held at least three conferences primarily sponsored that the department or agencies within the department have sponsored or provided some type of support to during the previous five years.

Answer:

The Department has provided support to UNESCO, OAS, and European Union conferences which have held three or more conferences over the previous five years.

Question:

Can you provide an estimate of what you expect the total conference related costs, including travel, staff time, preparation and contributions, for the department is likely to be in FY 2006?

Answer:

The Department has estimated that FY2006 conference related cost will be \$28.1M.

Question:

You indicated some willingness or desire to restrict travel and conference costs. Would you be willing to work with my office this year to write into law some commonsense rules to govern conference, travel and meeting expenses as part of the appropriations process?

Answer:

The Department is always looking for opportunities to improve operating efficiency and effectiveness and would be willing to work through the OMB review process to comment on proposed legislation involving conference costs.

Question:

Planning any event, especially a large conference, must distract numerous employees for many months to orchestrate the meeting. Do conferences actually have an unintended consequence of siphoning away resources and staff time?

a. Is this cost effective use of staff time and resources?

Answer:

Well planned conferences are a necessary part of our business. The Department carefully evaluates which conferences we hold and attend to ensure the effective use of both staff and resources.

Question:

Has your department and its agencies purchased equipment to allow teleconferencing?

Answer:

Yes

Question:

- a. Could you provide a line itemed and detailed listing of that equipment and the amounts spent for it?

Answer:

The Department has deployed about 500 unclassified video systems both foreign and domestic over the past several years. Costs per system ranged from \$2k to \$20k per site. During the past two years the Department added video to its classified network, placing about 100 systems worldwide. The cost for this latest deployment was approximately \$3 million and shared between the Department and its military partners who use the capability at posts.

Question:

- b. What impact-- if any-- has the purchase of this technology had on the number of employees traveling to meetings and the amount spent on conferences?

Answer:

The use of video teleconferencing equipment lowered the number of employees traveling to meetings and the overall cost of conference

attendance. In addition to supporting a reduction in travel, it facilitates a more dynamic exchange across the Department; and improves productivity of people; people are better able to exchange ideas face to face in additional situations where travel would not be considered.

Question:

Have you considered reimbursing employees for incidentals instead of issuing per diems as a way to cut costs?

Answer:

The Department switched to lodging plus meals and incidental expenses vice actual costs several years ago after a study found it was more costly to submit actual costs and it was a lot less paperwork.

Question:

- a. When issuing per diems does anyone consider that a majority of the meals are included in the conference fees?

Answer:

Current regulations require that an employee exclude from per diem any meals that are provided to employee. Therefore, an employee should not receive reimbursement in instances where meals have been provided while in attendance at a conference.

Question:

Do most of the conferences supported by your agency have an obvious outcome that advances your agency's mission?

Answer:

The Department's approval, planning and review process helps to ensure that conferences advance the goals and objectives set by the Secretary.

Question:

I realize that a large part of the State Department's business relies on travel and face to face meetings. Do you have a more rigorous vetting process in place to ensure that the U.S. is not supporting ideas or individuals and conferences which conflict with American interests?

Answer:

The Department's approval process for conferences, as previously outlined, effectively "vets" that the objectives associated with Department attendance at those events best serves U.S. national interests.

Question:

In February 2005 the State Department sent officials to a counterterrorism conference in Saudi Arabia. Why would the State Department send a delegation to a conference, which purposefully excluded our ally Israel and included state sponsors of terrorism, Iran and Syria?

- a. What was the message delivered by the State Department at this conference?
- b. Does the U.S. presence imply a form of endorsement of the ideas promoted at this event?

Answer:

On February 5-8, 2005, a U.S. delegation led by Frances Fragos Townsend, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, joined delegations from more than 50 countries and international organizations at the Counterterrorism International Conference in Riyadh,

Saudi Arabia. The U.S. delegation included representatives from the National Security Council, Department of State, Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, Federal Bureau of Investigation and other agencies.

In her opening statement to the conference, Ms. Townsend strongly criticized the remaining state sponsors of terrorism and quoted President Bush from 2001: “Every nation in every region now has a decision to make - either you are with us or you are with the terrorists;” and 2005: “Iran remains the world's primary state sponsor of terror.”

The conference’s concluding communiqué, known as the “Riyadh Declaration”, addresses terrorism in landmark terms for an international document. The Declaration states explicitly that, “No matter what pretext terrorists may use for their deeds, terrorism has no justification. Terrorism under all circumstances, regardless of the alleged motives, should be universally condemned.” The Declaration also acknowledges the “need to prevent any intolerance against any religion”, another key U.S. objective. The presence of U.S. representation ensured that our position on terrorism was highlighted in the final communiqué. Had we chosen not to participate the wording could have been different.

Question:

In December the State Department sent a deputy assistant secretary to a conference sponsored by a known anti-Semitic group which vocally opposes the U.S. government’s efforts to shut down terrorist financiers, sponsors militant rallies and conferences, associates with known radical Islamists, and rationalizes Palestinian suicide bombings. They call Hezbollah and Hamas “freedom fighters.” In her speech at the conference, the senior State official

praised the conference sponsors as “engaged” and encouraged people to listen to them and their ideas.

- a. Why did the State Department send an official to praise a group which has a well documented history of supporting radical groups and terrorist causes?

Answer:

As U/S Hughes has made clear, the Administration is committed to a program of promoting outreach to a broad range of communities, including the American Muslim community to explain U.S. policy, the importance of combating extremism and the proliferation of terrorism, and encouraging moderate Muslims to play a leadership role in this effort.

That was precisely the message of the Administration officials who attended this conference, and we will continue to engage representatives of the American Muslim community in an effort to advance these critically important goals.

Question:

In 2004, the State Department sent 50 or more employees to at least 14 conferences. Do you have a limit on how many people are permitted to travel to a single conference?

Answer:

The Department sends representatives from appropriate bureaus to conferences. Any group of twenty five or more must go through a vetting process with approval by the Under Secretary for Management.

Question:

- a. Have you ever consciously sent a smaller delegation and used E-conferencing to loop in more employees who did not travel to the meeting or conference?

Answer:

Yes, the Department sends smaller delegations and uses conferencing equipment if the communication and representation is consistent with the Departments needs.

Question:

Public law 109–108 signed by President Bush on November 22, 2005 stated "None of the funds made available in this Act may be used to send or otherwise pay for the attendance of more than 50 employees of agencies or departments of the United States Government who are stationed in the United States, at any single international conference occurring outside the United States, unless the Secretary of State determines that such attendance is in the national interest."

- a. Has any such conference requiring attendance of more than employees occurred since this law was signed? If so please list and include a detailed summary of the national interest involved. Has this law hindered in any significant way the Department's ability to fulfill its mission?

Answer:

The Department is unaware of any instance since the enactment date in which SSJC funds were used to pay the expenses of more than 50 USG employees stationed in the United States to attend such a conference.

It is the Department's policy to keep delegations to international conferences to the smallest size necessary to advance USG interests. We are unaware of any situation in which this law has impeded the Department's ability to fulfill its mission.